

Hey Boss, Are My

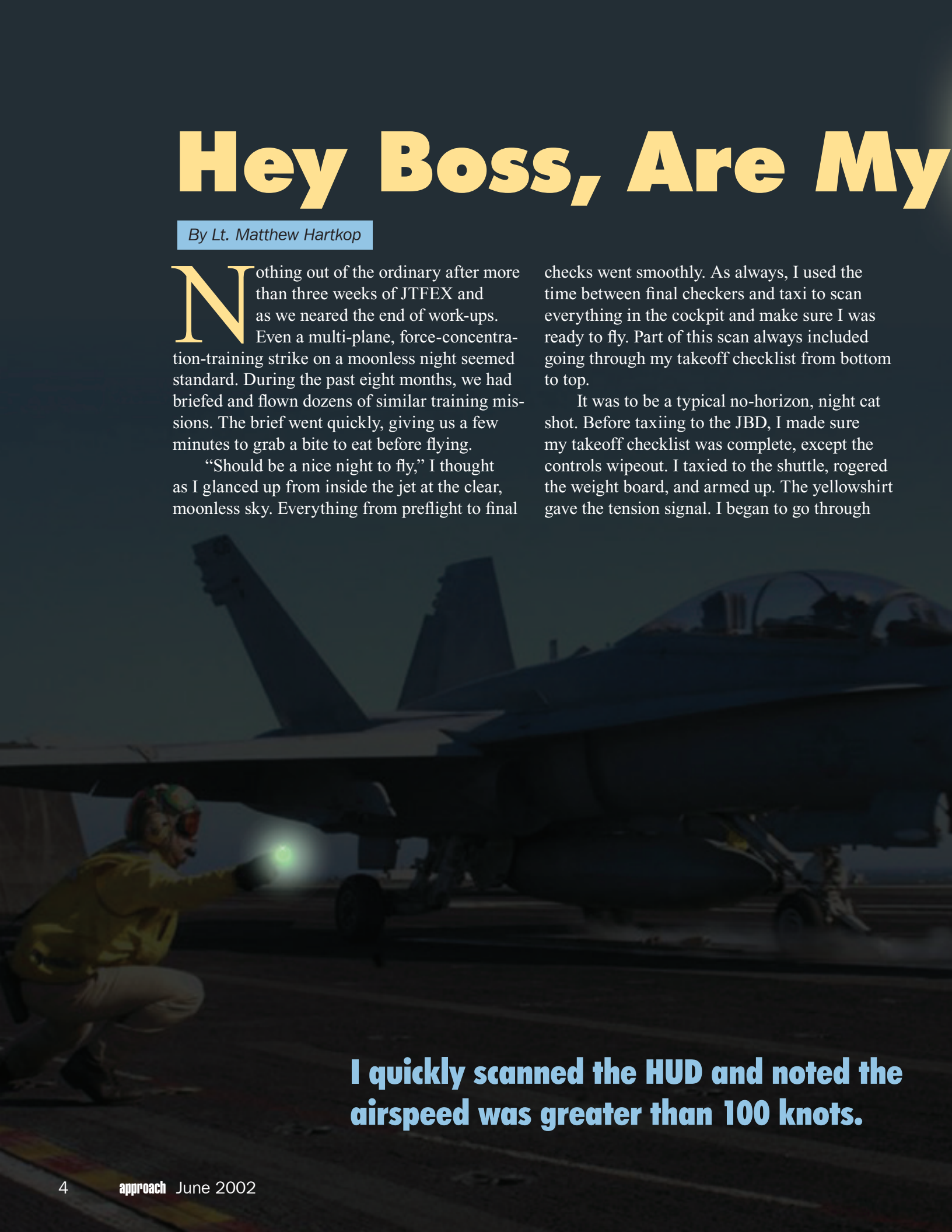
By Lt. Matthew Hartkop

Nothing out of the ordinary after more than three weeks of JTFEX and as we neared the end of work-ups. Even a multi-plane, force-concentration-training strike on a moonless night seemed standard. During the past eight months, we had briefed and flown dozens of similar training missions. The brief went quickly, giving us a few minutes to grab a bite to eat before flying.

“Should be a nice night to fly,” I thought as I glanced up from inside the jet at the clear, moonless sky. Everything from preflight to final

checks went smoothly. As always, I used the time between final checkers and taxi to scan everything in the cockpit and make sure I was ready to fly. Part of this scan always included going through my takeoff checklist from bottom to top.

It was to be a typical no-horizon, night cat shot. Before taxiing to the JBD, I made sure my takeoff checklist was complete, except the controls wipeout. I taxied to the shuttle, rogered the weight board, and armed up. The yellowshirt gave the tension signal. I began to go through



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Lights On?

my checks, “Controls—free and correct. Flaps—whooaaaaa!”

As I looked down to double-check the flaps, they were set to one-half, my head was slammed against my left shoulder by the catapult firing.

My initial thought was the holdback had malfunctioned because my lights still were off, and it had been only a few seconds since I went into tension. I quickly scanned the HUD and noted the airspeed was greater than 100 knots. It felt like a good cat shot. Down the stroke, I instinctively had shoved the throttles into max AB and flew away safely, making a slightly stunned, “305 airborne?” call.

After an uneventful flight and recovery, I returned to the ready room to find a stack of messages waiting for me. The shooter, the boss, and the ship’s captain had called. After I apologized for being shot with my lights

off, the CO of the ship told me I had missed a golden opportunity to dump on the boss over the radio.

Only later did several more appropriate radio calls come to mind. Such as:

“Boss, 305.”

“Go ahead 305.”

“Are my lights on?”

“No”

“Well, then why the #\$%^ am I flying?”

Or, after waiting for the call, “305, turn on your lights,” responding with, “I’ll turn my lights on when I’m ready to go flying!”

Later that night, I sat down with the shooters to discuss the incident. As it turns out, there was a shooter under instruction (UI) launching aircraft from cat 4. He went through all of his checks, and once his checks were complete, he immediately signaled for the deck-edge operator to launch the aircraft—without actually checking that the aircraft lights were on. The deck-edge operator failed to notice the aircraft did not have its lights on and, out of habit, launched the aircraft. Fortunately, everything worked out, and we were left with a cool video of a Hornet going down the cat at night with its lights off.

I left that meeting with the shooters confident my experience was simply a fluke, an accident that was so unlikely it never could happen again. After all, I never had heard of anyone ever being launched off the catapult before they either saluted (day) or turned their lights on (night).

Two months later, this incident had faded my memory. The sun was setting over the Mediterranean as I taxied to the catapult and completed my takeoff checks. The ordies armed me, and the yellowshirt gave the tension signal. I had advanced the throttles to military when I again felt that heart-stopping and unexpected catapult shot. Instinctively, I shoved the throttles into full AB and scanned airspeed down the cat. After safely flying away, I was at a loss for words.

Photo by PH3 J. Scott Campbell
Photo modification by Patricia Eaton